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U.S. Now Trying Softer Approach Toward Karzai

By HELENE COOPER and MARK LANDLER

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After more than a year of watching America's ability to influence President Hamid Karzai ebb, Obama administration officials now admit privately that the tough-love approach Mr. Obama adopted when he came to power may have been a big mistake.

The difference in approach was evident in two recent scenes on *Air Force One*.

Scene 1, March 28: Gen. James L. Jones, the national security adviser, visited reporters flying with the president from Washington to Kabul and promised that President Obama would take on the Afghan president for ignoring American demands on corruption and drug trafficking.

Scene 2, Friday: General Jones visited reporters, this time traveling with the president to Washington from Prague, and told them that Mr. Obama had sent Mr. Karzai a thank-you note expressing gratitude to the Afghan leader for dinner in Kabul. "It was a respectful letter," General Jones said.

What happened between these two scenes? Mr. Karzai publicly lashed out against Western governments, hosted the president of Iran and said he would join the Taliban if the international community kept pressuring him.

Obama administration officials maintain that they are not going to return to the days when President George W. Bush and Mr. Karzai would have twice-monthly videoconferences. But the pivot reflects a recognition that public pressure on Mr. Karzai may have driven him away. "In

some ways, we want to do more of the love part of ‘tough love,’ and less of the tough part,” a senior administration official said.

The turnabout reflects a growing recognition that the more the administration has taken Mr. Karzai to task publicly, the more resistant he has been to American demands. It also shows that no matter how much administration officials try to work around him, they have no choice but to deal with him.

The relationship with Mr. Karzai has grown so tense, administration officials said, that the foreign leader who may be most important to American interests barely speaks to some of the president’s senior advisers. His relationship with the two key administration emissaries — [Richard C. Holbrooke](#) and [Karl Eikenberry](#) — is deeply strained. He has also clashed with Vice President [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) Mr. Karzai’s ties to Mr. Obama himself are, at best, distant.

The only official with whom Mr. Karzai has a solid, day-to-day relationship is the top American military commander in [Afghanistan](#), Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#).

The tension with Mr. Karzai mirrors internal stresses within the administration’s [Afghanistan](#) team, including friction between Mr. Eikenberry, who is the American ambassador to [Afghanistan](#), and the military, and between Mr. Holbrooke and the White House.

Military officials remain wary of Mr. Eikenberry, himself a former general who served in [Afghanistan](#), after he sent a diplomatic cable last fall that warned that sending additional forces to [Afghanistan](#) would result in “astronomical costs” and increase [Afghanistan](#)’s dependence on the United States. General McChrystal and other military commanders at the time had requested additional troops, which they received. To this day, the Pentagon, the State Department and the White House all blame one another for leaking the highly classified memo to the news media.

Mr. Holbrooke, the administration’s special representative to [Afghanistan](#) and [Pakistan](#), has taken a lower profile in [Afghanistan](#) after a contentious first year with Mr. Karzai that included testy encounters over the Afghan leader’s conduct after his country’s elections. While Mr. Holbrooke did leave Friday for a trip to [Afghanistan](#), he was not a part of the entourage that accompanied Mr. Obama to [Kabul](#) two weeks ago, a remarkable absence given that he is supposed to be the top official in dealing with the region.

Managing the relationship with Mr. Karzai is important because so much of Mr. Obama’s strategy in [Afghanistan](#), where he will soon have an American deployment of close to 100,000 troops, is contingent on the administration’s ability to get the Afghans to take the lead so the United States can eventually withdraw.

On March 28, as Mr. Obama prepared to meet with Mr. Karzai, General Jones told reporters that the American president would try to “make him understand that in his second term, there are certain things that have been not paid attention to, almost since Day 1,” like battling corruption. [Afghanistan](#) experts say that the public hectoring undermined Mr. Obama’s visit, and helped ignite Mr. Karzai’s most recent anti-American and anti-Western remarks. “It was a poorly handled visit,” a European diplomat said.

The damage was compounded when the White House reacted to Mr. Karzai's outburst by hinting that Mr. Obama might rescind his invitation to Mr. Karzai to visit Washington next month. White House officials, one administration said, took umbrage that the Afghan leader would lash out right after his biggest benefactor visited. But officials at the State Department argued that the cycle of vitriol needed to be stopped before it spiraled out of control.

"There is a realization that public remonstrances and temper tantrums don't work," said Bruce O. Riedel, an Afghanistan expert at the [Brookings Institution](#) who has worked with the administration on Afghan policy. "It brings out the worst in Karzai, while undermining support for the war effort in Congress, in the media, and in the public. If you disparage Karzai, you're in effect saying the war cannot be won."

Several Afghanistan experts noted that the one success the Obama administration has had with Mr. Karzai was last October, when the administration sent Senator [John Kerry](#), Democrat of Massachusetts, to Kabul to talk Mr. Karzai into agreeing to a runoff election. Mr. Kerry took long walks with Mr. Karzai in the gardens of the heavily fortified presidential palace in Kabul, recounting his own personal political experiences and commiserating with Mr. Karzai, who eventually relented under the pressure.

That contrasts sharply with other high-profile dealings between Obama administration officials and Mr. Karzai. Earlier this year, Mr. Eikenberry was quoted in a confidential diplomatic cable saying that Mr. Karzai "is not an adequate strategic partner." In February 2008, Mr. Biden ended a dinner with Mr. Karzai, throwing his napkin down, after Mr. Karzai told him that there was no corruption in Afghanistan and that, in any case, it was not his fault.

And Mr. Obama himself has publicly referred to the Karzai government as "very detached from what's going on in the surrounding community."

Now, "Cooler heads are starting to prevail," said Mr. Riedel, of Brookings. You'll see, I hope, a more nuanced approach."

The more nuanced approach relies more on General McChrystal, who speaks daily with Mr. Karzai and who has traveled around the country with him, developing a reservoir of trust, administration officials said. Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) is also emerging as an interlocutor. She has tried to appeal to him as a fellow politician.

The clearest signal of the new approach came during Friday's Air Force One flight. "We believe that we are on an encouraging glide path in Afghanistan," General Jones said, adding that during Mr. Obama's visit to Afghanistan, the American delegation was "generally impressed with the quality of the ministers and the seriousness with which they're approaching their job."

Mr. Obama, General Jones said, was "fortified by the conversations he had, reassured by the conversations" with Mr. Karzai.